Five-year Report to
the Legislature on

Ecological Reserves

April 1, 1999 - March 31, 2004

Protecting & Managing our Future

Manitoba

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Photo Credits

Except where otherwise indicated, photos used to illustrate this report were taken by former and current staff of Manitoba Conservation (or its predecessor departments such as Natural Resources) and most also come from the Ecological Reserves Program files.

Kim Monson, on behalf of the Manitoba Speleological Society, provided the cave photos used in the report. Karen Johnson, a former member of the Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee and retired from the Manitoba Museum took the photos of Baralzon Lake Ecological Reserve.

Cover Photo: Deep Basin, Walter Cook Uplands Caves Park Reserve. The Walter Cook Cave area was proposed as an ecological reserve, because of its unique diversity of karst topography - features created by the effects of water dissolving limestone and dolomite rocks. Considered unique in North America, Deep Basin is underlain by subterranean passages that affect the water level in the basin. The basin is dry during drought years and floods during wet periods.

To His Honour
The Honourable John Harvard
Lieutenant Governor of Manitoba

Your Honour:

I am pleased to present the *Five-year Report to the Legislature on Ecological Reserves* for the period April 1, 1999 to March 31, 2004. Ecological reserves set aside outstanding examples of Manitoba's unique sites and landscapes.

During the past five years, work continued to protect representative and unique portions of Manitoba's natural habitats and landscapes. The Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee recommended 17 new candidate areas and forwarded them for consideration by the various ministers responsible for ecological reserves during this time. These, and previously nominated sites, were evaluated and two sites were given interim protection as park reserves to allow for further consultations. At the end of the current reporting period, the necessary internal government reviews and external consultations were nearing completion for four sites. These four, and one other site, have recently been designated as ecological reserves.

Yours sincerely,

Stan Struthers
Minister

To the Honourable Stan Struthers
Minister of Conservation

Sir:

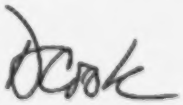
I am pleased to provide this *Five-year Report to the Legislature on Ecological Reserves* for the period April 1, 1999 to March 31, 2004. The report provides an overview of the status of the Ecological Reserves Program and describes activities that have taken place during this period.

Ecological reserves are one of several designations in the network of protected areas administered by Manitoba Conservation. As Manitoba's most protected provincially designated areas, ecological reserves set aside outstanding examples of Manitoba's ecologically unique sites and landscapes.

During the reporting period, the Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee –appointed in accordance with *The Ecological Reserves Act* – continued identifying sites worth preserving as ecological reserves. The committee forwarded nominations for 17 new sites. Nominated sites then go though a thorough, lengthy review process both within and outside government. The committee has recommended improvements to streamline this review process.

Two sites nominated as ecological reserves were designated as park reserves during the reporting period. Consultations on, and final government review of, other committee-nominated sites was well advanced by March 31, 2004. To date, five new ecological reserves have been designated during the current reporting period.

Yours sincerely,



Don Cook
Acting Deputy Minister

Executive Summary

Manitoba's system of ecological reserves consists of sites established under *The Ecological Reserves Act*. The Manitoba conservation minister currently administers the act. Ecological reserves are the most protected of the provincially designated sites within the network of protected areas in Manitoba. They play a unique role in setting aside a significant and representative portion of our land in its most natural state, free from intensive recreational development or resource harvest. To March 31, 2004, 16 ecological reserves totalling 60,425 hectares have been designated.

Between April 1999 and March 2004, the Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee met 24 times. They focused on drafting nominations from a list of some 50 candidate sites identified during the previous reporting period. Eight new candidate sites were also identified during the current reporting period. By March 31, 2004, 23 sites nominated by the committee were under consideration for ecological reserve status. Of these, 17 were submitted during the current reporting period and six had been submitted previously. Two nominations were nearing completion. Preliminary work began on drafting nominations for six other sites and work was pending on 25 other sites identified for committee consideration. As a result of information gathered during the drafting process, the committee decided against completing or submitting nominations for two of the candidate sites.

Mixedwood river bottom forest, Brokenhead River Ecological Reserve

The conservation minister refers nominated sites to external and internal government review processes. Two sites previously nominated as ecological reserves by the committee were designated as park reserves. This gives them legal, interim protection for five years to allow for more detailed consultations on a final designation. Part of another nominated site is no longer available for consideration as it is part of a large parcel of land transferred to Canada as part of Treaty Land Entitlement for a Manitoba First Nation.

The minister recommended one site to cabinet before the close of the reporting period early in the new fiscal year. Final review of four additional sites was also nearing completion by March 31, 2004.

In 2002, a brochure on ecological reserves was published and an ecological reserves home page was established on the Manitoba Conservation website at: gov.mb.ca/conservation/parks/ecological_reserves/index.html.

Research on bats in Lake St. George Caves Ecological Reserve continued throughout the reporting period. In late 2003, the required ministerial approval was given to access two survey monuments on Whitemouth Island Ecological Reserve.

The Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee recommended two ways to enhance the creation of new ecological reserves:

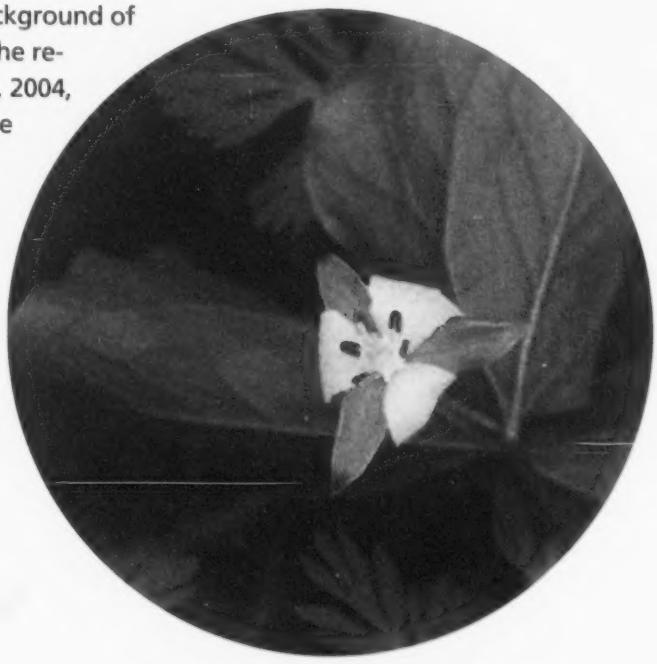
- provide additional resources to operate the program
- revise the existing complex internal government and external review process

Small bellwort, Whitemouth Island Ecological Reserve

Introduction

The Five-year Report to the Legislature is a requirement of an amendment to *The Ecological Reserves Act*, assented to December 22, 1989. The act calls for a report every five years presenting information about the status, management and use of ecological reserves. This is the third such report. The first, covering the period April 1, 1989 to March 31 1994, was distributed to members of the legislative assembly on July 25, 1995. The second, for April 1, 1994 through March 31, 1999, was tabled in the legislature on April 18, 2001.

This report provides an overview and background of the program, discusses activities during the reporting period April 1, 1999 to March 31, 2004, and provides recommendations for future action. As with the previous five-year report, the Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee has provided observations and recommendations as a separate appendix to this report.



Nodding trillium,
Whitemouth Island
Ecological Reserve

Program Overview

Policy Framework

Manitoba's Ecological Reserves Program grew out of the world-wide effort to inventory shrinking natural resources as part of the International Biological Program (IBP). Canada joined the IBP in 1964 and sites in Manitoba were surveyed from 1968 to 1973. Manitoba's Ecological Reserves Program began in 1973, with our first ecological reserve established in 1976. The first four ecological reserves were established under *The Crown Lands Act*. Passage of the first *Ecological Reserves Act* in 1981 led to all subsequent ecological reserves being established under this legislation. As of March 31, 2004 16 ecological reserves have been established covering a total of almost 60,500 hectares (Map 1, Table 1).

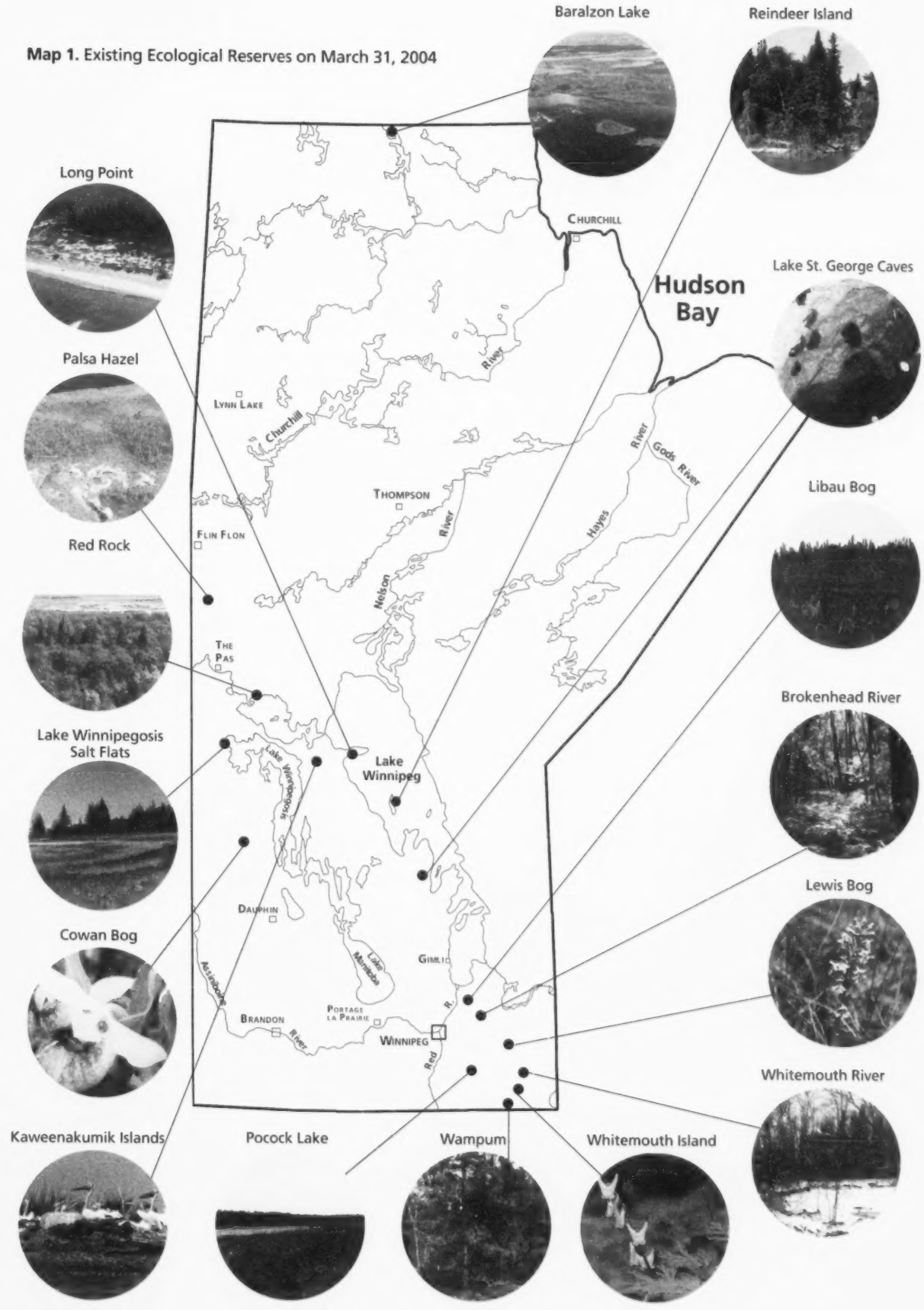
TABLE 1: LIST OF ECOLOGICAL RESERVES

NAME	YEAR CREATED	AREA (ha)	ECOSYSTEMS REPRESENTED AND OUTSTANDING FEATURES
BARALZON LAKE	1989	39600	Low arctic tundra, lakes and rivers, rare arctic plants
BROKENHEAD RIVER	1978	64	Mixedwood river bottom forest
COWAN BOG	1983	518	Spruce bog and associated lakes, rare orchids
KAWEENAKUMIK ISLANDS	1989	63	Colonial nesting birds and caribou use
LAKE ST. GEORGE CAVES	1997	49	Caves in limestone karst, largest known Manitoba bat hibernaculum
LAKE WINNIPEGOSIS SALT FLATS	1992	573	Saline flats and gradients, open freshwater lake, spruce forest
LEWIS BOG	1987	569	Fen, rare orchids
LIBAU BOG	1989	180	Black spruce/tamarack bog, floating sedge bog, orchids
LONG POINT	1987	1837	Beach ridges and bogs, eastern white cedar, burned July 1988
PALSA HAZEL	1997	1648	Permafrost features - palsa mounds and scars in unfrozen wetlands
POCOCK LAKE	1982	157	Transition from upland ancient beach ridge to bog lake
RED ROCK	1979	502	White spruce beach ridge and marsh, northernmost bur oak
REINDEER ISLAND	1976	13860	Mature upland forest and bogs on island in Lake Winnipeg
WAMPUM	1978	62	Remnant mature red pine stand
WHITEMOUTH ISLAND	1999	613	Deciduous eastern forest with several Manitoba rare plant species
WHITEMOUTH RIVER	1986	130	Mixed forest, distinct lowland riverbank species

Ecological reserves directly support key elements of many national and international commitments and agreements to set aside unique and representative examples of the earth's biodiversity and landscapes. These include the:

- 1989 World Wildlife Fund Canada Endangered Spaces Campaign
- June 1992 United Nations Convention on Biodiversity, and the subsequent Programmes of Work on Protected Areas agreed to at subsequent Conferences of the Parties to implement the convention
- November 25, 1992 federal-provincial-territorial Statement of Commitment to Complete Canada's Network of Protected Areas

Map 1. Existing Ecological Reserves on March 31, 2004



Legislative Requirements

The *Ecological Reserves Act* specifies the purpose of ecological reserves, how they are administered and what activities are permitted in them. In Manitoba, ecological reserves can only be established on Crown land. They preserve unique and representative plants, animals and geological features, natural landscapes and ecological processes. They can include both natural and modified ecosystems. Under permit, ecological reserves may be used for research, education and nature study. They are not set aside as recreational, resource harvest or multiple use areas. Ecological reserves are the most protected category of designated provincial lands in Manitoba. Until 1993, ecological reserves were the only provincially designated lands that met the requirements of the World Wildlife Fund Canada Endangered Spaces Campaign for protected areas - areas that are legally protected from intensive industrial, recreational and agricultural development.

The Ecological Reserves Act governs what activities are allowed in ecological reserves. As Manitoba's most protected areas, prior approval from the conservation minister is required to conduct any activity in an ecological reserve. General ministerial orders, however, allow people to enter and travel through most ecological reserves on foot without need to obtain a specific permit. Sport hunting is prohibited in ecological reserves, as is removing plants and other materials. Traditional land use by First Nations people, however, is generally permitted. If the feature being protected by an ecological reserve could be at risk by traditional use, government will consult with First Nations about treaty and legal obligations. The goal is to ensure conservation of the feature, while accommodating traditional use to the greatest extent possible. The Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee reviews proposals for scientific research and management activities in ecological reserves before submitting them to the minister for a decision.

Program Administration

The Ecological Reserves Act allows the lieutenant governor in council to appoint an Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee. The committee provides advice about the establishment of ecological reserves and their stewardship to the minister responsible for administering the act. Under the act, the committee sets its own rules of procedure. The act also outlines the four principal duties of the committee. In accordance with the act, the minister has requested the committee to:

- examine, inspect and recommend on the suitability of candidate areas
- receive, consider and recommend on submissions from the public
- provide, or make available to the public and government, information on ecological features and ecologically significant areas in Manitoba
- advise on administration of the act

Since 1992, Parks and Natural Areas Branch has administered the Ecological Reserves Program. The director of Parks and Natural Areas also acts as director of Ecological Reserves in accordance with *The Ecological Reserves Act*. One branch staff person administers the Ecological Reserves Program, and acts as secretary to the Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee. Parks and Natural Areas Branch provides general administration of the program including management and direction; liaison with staff of other branches and regional staff of Manitoba Conservation and with other government agencies and departments; program planning; policy and procedure formulation and implementation; legislation development; and budget co-ordination, allocation and control.

Proposals for development activities (road upgrades, forest harvest, gravel pits, municipal plans, Crown land sales, etc.) are screened to ensure that they do not affect existing or proposed ecological reserves.

Site Nomination and Review Process

Available information on candidate sites identified to the Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee as worthy of consideration as possible ecological reserves is compiled and incorporated into draft nominations for committee review. Individual committee members draft some nominations. Those who identify a site occasionally draft other nominations, but program staff draft most nominations. The committee reviews draft nominations, provides additional information, suggests revisions, or requests additional information, as needed. Once the committee is satisfied that the site nomination is complete, the nomination is formally considered at a committee meeting. Approved nominations recommended for designation are submitted to the minister responsible for ecological reserves.

The minister submits nominated sites to a formal internal government and external review process. This process can be complex. Initially, it is reviewed within Manitoba Conservation, followed by the Protected Areas Initiative consultation process that focuses on the minerals and forestry sectors and First Nations. Where there is support for designation from these reviews, sites are submitted to the final government review process to ensure no other agencies may have concerns with designation. Only rarely are sites with unresolved issues submitted to cabinet for resolution.

Showy lady's-slippers are found in many ecological reserves

Reporting Period Activities

Commitments and Recommendations from Previous Five-year Report

The previous *Five-year Report to the Legislature on Ecological Reserves* identified three broad areas that were to be the focus during the 1999-2004 reporting period:

1. continue to recognize and document the ecological significance of areas throughout the province
2. increase efforts to communicate better to the public and interested parties about the role ecological reserves play in the network of protected areas
3. evaluate ways to streamline the review and consultation process for proposed ecological reserves

This section reports on what activities occurred during the reporting period and indicates the extent to which these commitments and recommendations were addressed.

Policy and Program Administration

A general Manitoba government reorganization in October 1999 resulted in ministerial responsibility for the Ecological Reserves Program changing from the minister of natural resources to the conservation minister.

Two policy documents dealing with protected areas were developed and distributed during the reporting period. *An Action Plan for Manitoba's Network of Protected Areas: January 1, 2000 - January 1, 2003* was released, becoming the third edition of the action plan. Previous editions were issued in 1994 and 1997. The most recent document updated the earlier 1997 action plan and reaffirmed the provincial commitments to set aside, in protected areas, adequate examples of Manitoba's biodiversity by preserving unique and representative landscapes. In March 2000, a memorandum of understanding on establishment of new protected areas, originally signed with Manitoba First Nations organizations in March 1998, was extended for an additional three years. The memorandum requires consultation with affected First Nation communities before new protected areas are established, and outlines the principles to be followed. These policy initiatives and documents focus on all types of protected areas, not just ecological reserves. They continued to guide activities in establishing new protected areas, including ecological reserves, throughout the reporting period.

The committee had the same four members as in the previous reporting period, and met 24 times between April 1, 1999 and March 31, 2004. The committee provided comments on the broad policy of protected areas during various meetings

and also examined the need to extend the focus beyond terrestrial ecosystems to freshwater and marine protected areas. The committee continued to be the only external government advisory committee with a mandate to advise, recommend and promote areas worthy of protection as ecological reserves.

Staffing

During the reporting period, some additional staff support was provided to the program, in addition to the existing secretary, to address, in part, the committee's concern about a lack of progress on nominating and designating new sites. In October 2001 one person was hired for six months to assist with consultations, particularly with nearby First Nations and communities. Ecological reserves made up about 25-30 per cent of the position workload. This position became permanent in fall 2002 and continued to provide support to the program for the rest of the reporting period. Two short-term positions were also created to work full-time gathering data on candidate sites and initial drafting of new nominations. One position was for four months in summer 2000 and the other for six months in the last half of 2002.

Site Nominations and Reviews

Major efforts during the reporting period included:

- documenting the ecological significance of candidate sites
- drafting nominations
- submitting nominations to the minister
- having nominations reviewed

During the reporting period, review of proposed ecological reserves was incorporated in the Protected Areas Initiative consultation process. Information on nominated ecological reserves was provided to the forest and mineral sectors, as well as to all First Nations and other nearby communities that might be affected. As in the past, efforts to establish new ecological reserves continued slowly, in part because ecological reserves have many more constraints on uses and activities than other protected areas. This makes it more difficult to obtain consensus for approval to create a new ecological reserve.

All 23 previously nominated sites were reviewed in fall 2002 within Manitoba Conservation to identify those with minimal concerns. The reports were provided to the committee. A priority group of six sites were identified and efforts focused on completing the necessary consultations to achieve designation. By March 31, 2004, four sites were well advanced and their designation as ecological reserves was anticipated later in 2004 or in 2005.

During the reporting period, the Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee reviewed and recommended 17 new candidate sites as ecological reserves to the minister responsible for ecological reserves. As a result, by March 31, 2004, a total of 23 sites had been nominated during this, and previous reporting periods, and were awaiting review. Nominations for two other sites were nearing completion.

Based on information gathered during the drafting and committee-review process, the committee decided against proceeding with two sites initially identified as possible ecological reserves. One site was withdrawn at the initial stages of compiling information for drafting the nomination. The committee completed drafting of the nomination for the second site, and decided against submitting it because the site had extensive recreational use. In addition, part of one nominated site in the Porcupine Mountain was withdrawn in June 2003 when it was included in a parcel of land transferred to Canada as part of a First Nation Treaty Land Entitlement.

During the reporting period, significant effort was made on several other proposals in southwestern Manitoba where there currently are no ecological reserves. Discussions were held and correspondence was exchanged with a conservation organization on the possibility of acquiring some of its land for designation as an ecological reserve. Work also proceeded on drafting several other nominations. A variety of concerns related to private lands and existing allocations on Crown lands resulted in site nominations not proceeding. They were not withdrawn from future consideration to allow for further discussions if opportunities arise.

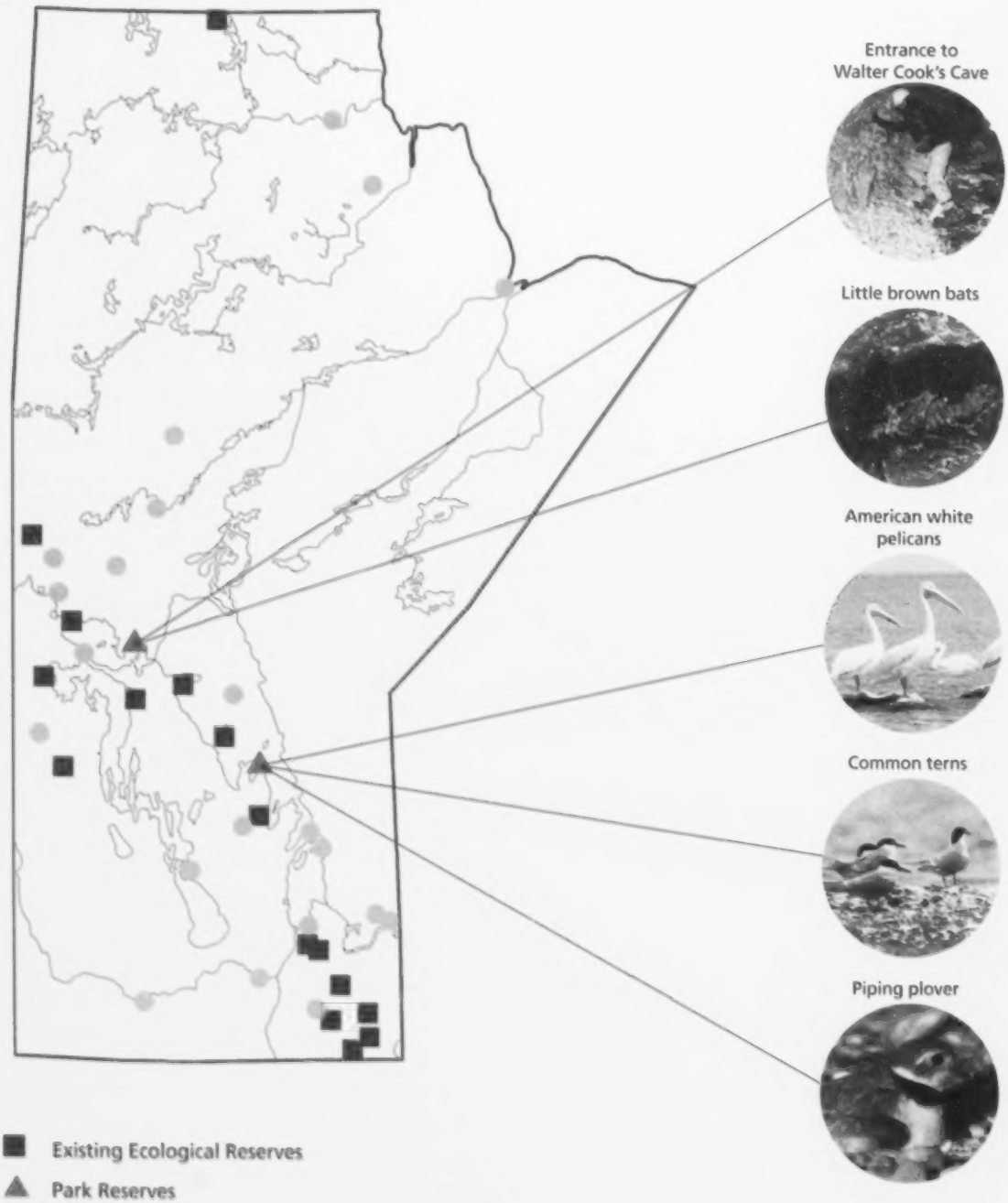
Designations

No new ecological reserves have been established in the past five years. Two sites nominated by the Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee, Walter Cook Caves and Pelican Islands, were designated as park reserves (Table 2, Map 2). This gave them legal interim protection and allows further consultations on final boundaries and the feasibility of establishing them as ecological reserves.

TABLE 2: PARK RESERVES PROPOSED TO BE ECOLOGICAL RESERVES

NAME	YEAR CREATED	YEAR EXPIRES	AREA (ha)	ECOSYSTEMS REPRESENTED AND OUTSTANDING FEATURES
PELICAN ISLANDS	JUN 2001	DEC 2006	130	Piping plover and colonial nesting birds (American white pelican, common tern)
WALTER COOK CAVES	AUG 2001	MAR 2007	3200	Karst features, caves, bat hibernacula for little brown bats, occasionally joined by northern long-eared and big brown bats

Map 2. Status of Sites Nominated as Ecological Reserves



as of March 31, 2004

Pelican Islands

The Pelican Islands site was first identified as a possible ecological reserve in 1998. The committee submitted the nomination to the minister in August 1999. Although agreement could not be reached to designate the site as an ecological reserve, by spring 2001, there was a general consensus, including support from nearby First Nations, to designate the area as a park reserve. This would allow for further review and consultation. This designation expires December 14, 2006.

Six separate islands located in the north basin of Lake Winnipeg west of Commissioner Island make up Pelican Islands Park Reserve. These islands support a variety of colonial-nesting bird species including American white pelicans and common terns. The American white pelican is a species formerly considered at risk in Canada. It was removed from the list of species at risk, in large part, due to the healthy state of Manitoba populations. Piping plover, a designated Manitoba endangered species, has also been recorded on one of the islands.

Flow stone formation, Inguana Crypt Cave, Walter Cook Uplands Caves Park Reserve

The Walter Cook Caves

The Walter Cook Caves area near Grand Rapids was first identified as a proposed ecological reserve in 1997. The site honours the late Walter Cook, a respected community Elder committed to the preservation and well-being of the land. He introduced members of the Manitoba Speleological Society, a group interested in caves, cave exploration and mapping, to the location of three caves. The committee submitted the site nomination to the natural resources minister in June 1999. Falconbridge Limited held mineral rights to the area and agreed to give them up and support protecting the area. Consultations and discussions on designating the site began shortly after that. During these discussions, members of the Manitoba Speleological Society suggested changes to expand the initial boundary to preserve some additional features. The increased area was supported by Falconbridge Limited and the mining industry. Although agreement could not be reached to designate the site as an ecological reserve, by spring 2001, there was consensus, including support from the Grand Rapids First Nation and the Community of Grand Rapids, to designate the expanded area as a park reserve. This will allow for further review and consultation. The park reserve designation expires March 14, 2007.

The Walter Cook Uplands Caves Park Reserve contains outstanding examples of karst topography — limestone and dolomite areas dissolved by water creating many features, including six caves. Little brown bats overwinter in at least two of the caves, joined from time to time by northern long-eared bats and big brown bats. In one cave, Iguana Crypt, more than 300 little brown bats hibernate each winter along with a black bear. Moths also overwinter in some caves. Parts of the surface area of the site reveal stromatolites — spiral-like patterns formed by fossil algae-based reef formations hundreds of millions of years of age.

Research Activities

Research on bats in Lake St. George Caves Ecological Reserve continued throughout the reporting period. Instruments were installed in the St. George Cave, the largest known bat hibernaculum in the province, to record humidity, temperature and bat activity in fall 2002. Although results are still being analysed, recapture of banded bats over many years reconfirm the significance of this area and its crucial role in preserving the continuing presence of bats in Manitoba. Over 20,000 little brown bats hibernate each winter in this cave, along with some northern long-eared bats and big brown bats.

Access Request

In fall 2003, an application was received to allow access to survey monuments on Whitemouth Island Ecological Reserve to complete a legal survey for a private land subdivision nearby on the west shore of Whitemouth Lake. No alternative monuments could be used for the survey. The monuments dated back to the initial township surveys in the late 1800s and early 1900s, a century or more before the ecological reserve was created in 1999. As required by *The Ecological Reserves Act*, after detailed review of the request to access the monuments, ministerial approval was sought and given. The survey was conducted on foot in late January 2004 using the latest GPS technology resulting in minimal ecological impact.

Public Information and Outreach

A brochure *Ecological Reserves* was prepared and distributed in spring 2002.

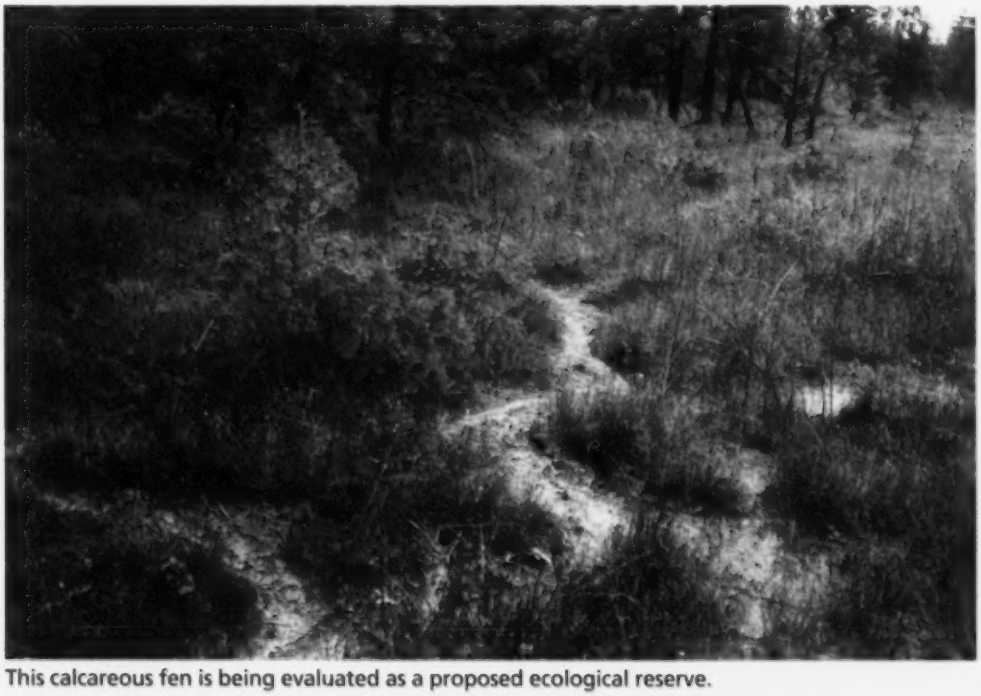
Information on the Ecological Reserves Program is accessible through the parks home page, also created in spring 2002, on the Manitoba Conservation portion of the Manitoba government website. This web page contains a copy of the ecological reserves brochure, The 1994-1999 Five-year Report to the Legislature, and information on how to nominate sites for consideration as possible ecological reserves. It can be accessed at: gov.mb.ca/conservation/parks/ecological_reserves/index.html.

The Next Five Years

Ecological reserves will continue to play a special role as the most protected of the provincially designated lands in Manitoba's network of protected areas. Recreational and resource harvest activities will continue to be prohibited, while acknowledging and accommodating Aboriginal and Treaty rights. There is a need to consult much more widely to establish an ecological reserve than is required for most other protected areas. This is because existing resource use, recreational commitments and interests need to be removed to establish new ecological reserves. Nevertheless, the program will continue focusing on creating new ecological reserves. In light of the significant work and progress completed during the 1999-2004 reporting period, at least five new ecological reserves will be established in the next five years.

When ecological reserve designation is not possible, protection by another designation will be considered. In this way, ecologically significant sites can be protected by implementing an appropriate designation and management regime to recognize and preserve their ecological significance.

During the next five years, work will continue to recognize and document the ecological significance of areas throughout the province, especially by soliciting input from knowledgeable scientists and naturalists. Opportunities will be explored to establish ecological reserves to protect unique sites as the core of a larger surrounding protected area.



This calcareous fen is being evaluated as a proposed ecological reserve.

A review will be conducted of all proposed candidate ecological reserves and all previously nominated sites that have been pending for a number of years. The results will be presented to the minister to determine which ones could be actively pursued as ecological reserves or other designation and which could be dropped from further consideration.

During the next five years, efforts to provide timely information to the public on ecological reserves and ecological issues will continue and expand. Site information and a location map will be provided on the ecological reserves website for all new ecological reserves that are designated in the future. Similar information will also be developed for the 16 ecological reserves designated previously.

Work will begin on developing a regulation to clarify the permitted uses and activities in ecological reserves.

Efforts will continue to evaluate ways of streamlining the review and consultation process for proposed ecological reserves. Aspects to be addressed include identifying internal government constraints that may delay their designation and evaluating ways these constraints could be reduced. The implications and feasibility of applying interim protection while detailed discussions continue on specific sites would also be evaluated.

A group of meadows in the Porcupine Hills is being evaluated as a proposed ecological reserve.

Appendix

COMMENTS PROVIDED BY THE ECOLOGICAL RESERVES ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON THE FIVE-YEAR REPORT TO THE LEGISLATURE 1999-2004

The Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee made several recommendations in an appendix to the previous five-year report. The committee recommended that:

- sufficient resources be given to operate the Ecological Reserves Program
- nominated ecological reserve proposals be reviewed expeditiously and within a defined time frame
- a mechanism be created to prevent resource allocations within nominated ecological reserves while nominations are under review
- goals be set to designate 10 new ecological reserves annually and to capture five per cent of protected areas in ecological reserves
- a brochure about the Ecological Reserves Program be prepared and a program website be established
- closer liaison should be encouraged among the Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee, the Endangered Species Advisory Committee and private conservation groups

The Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee has identified two major related issues that need to be addressed to ensure that the objectives of the program are met in a timely manner and new ecological reserves can be designated more quickly:

1. The complex review process that relies on consensus can take years before a decision is reached.
2. There is limited staff and funding to operate the program.

Since funding and staffing are limited, the committee recommends that emphasis be placed on designating new sites. Opportunities for designating new sites are decreasing greatly as more development and resource allocation decisions are made. Greater emphasis on establishing protected areas, in general, and ecological reserves in particular, is consistent with the principles of sustainable development.

Manitoba's Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee recommends that new ecological reserves (and other protected areas) focus on the key role of protecting and preserving Manitoba's biodiversity, especially the habitat of endangered species. Manitoba's Endangered Species Advisory Committee, appointed under *The Endangered Species Act*, focuses on identifying species that may be at risk of extinction,

but it has no ability to set aside and protect critical habitat for such species. The Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee has the ability to recommend ecologically important areas that should be protected. Closer co-operation and co-ordination of the activities of both committees is needed to help preserve Manitoba's biodiversity. Areas identified as critical habitat for species recommended by the Endangered Species Advisory Committee should be systematically evaluated by the Ecological Reserves Advisory Committee for recommendation as future ecological reserves.

In the past, commitments to development and allocation of resource use and harvesting have often occurred with minimal consideration to setting aside representative protected areas as part of an overall plan. In reviewing major developments, reasonable time limits are placed on making such decisions. However, in the case of protected areas in general, and ecological reserves in particular, nominated sites can sit in limbo for many years, and occasionally decades without a decision being made. Since no interim protection is provided to these candidate sites while reviews proceed, other commitments may make future designation impossible. This is particularly the case for minerals, where mineral claims may be staked without prior review and approval anywhere on open Crown or private lands where the Crown owns the mineral rights. The committee recommends that consideration be given to having a more even balance between decisions to approve areas for resource development and areas for resource protection. Decision-making in both cases should follow set and reasonable time frames.

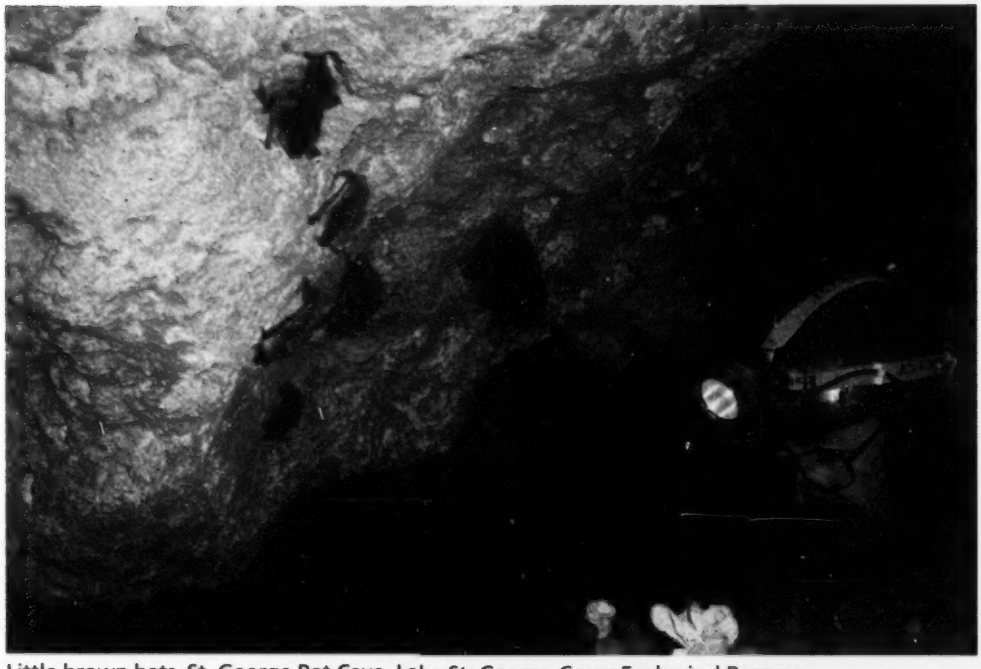
The committee believes the current difficulties in timely establishment of new ecological reserves relate to past decisions on resource allocation and harvest. Ecological reserves are the most protected provincially designated lands. Unlike most other provincially protected lands, existing uses, including, for example, sport hunting, sport fishing and outfitting, become potential obstacles to the creation of new ecological reserves.

Examining the process and progress of establishing new protected areas has led the committee to conclude that decisions appear to require consensus of all participants. This effectively gives all participants a veto on any new protected areas, or greatly delays the decision-making process. The committee recommends that reasonable but specific timelines be established in evaluating proposed protected areas including ecological reserves. This could be similar to the way timelines are set for decisions on a variety of development decisions, for example under *The Environment Act*.

In particular, the committee recommends that consideration be given to using the provision of *The Provincial Parks Act* to establish park reserves for an initial six-month period without consultation, to give interim protection to nominated ecological reserves. Use of this provision triggers a six-month consultation process to gather sufficient information for government to decide how to proceed. After six months options include:

- designating the site as an ecological reserve or other protected area
- extending the park reserve for a further five years
- deciding not to designate or protect the area

Although this provision has not been used to date, in the past, government has made policy decisions to give interim protection from new resource use and development allocations to a variety of sites while consultations and discussions on their protection continue. To avoid negative reactions about the change in approach, there should be initial discussions and consultations beforehand to advise the public and those participating in creating new ecological reserves (and other protected areas). Since staffing is limited, this process should be limited, at first, to the most urgent nominated sites. As experience is gained with this approach, there should be increased acceptance of its use, especially if it results in decisions to be made in a timely manner.



Little brown bats, St. George Bat Cave, Lake St. George Caves Ecological Reserve.

Palsa Hazel Ecological Reserve within Grass River Provincial Park

Double-crested cormorants and American white pelicans, south end of Reindeer Island Ecological Reserve